



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

I am Curious (Blue)

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(Lena's interviews, of course, could not be scripted. But Sjöman told her what questions to ask.) And what resulted, the *Yellow* and *Blue* films as a single unit, may well be one of the most important films of our time.

I AM CURIOUS (BLUE)

A yellow cross, by itself, is one thing. Place it on a blue background and it becomes the flag of Sweden. *I Am Curious (Yellow)* placed on the background of *I Am Curious (Blue)* becomes something quite different from *I Am Curious (Yellow)* taken alone.

I confess to having had a feeling of disbelief when I first heard Sjöman's claim that he could not adequately say all he had to say in a single film of relatively ordinary length. Other filmmakers have made the same claim, but such assertions are extremely difficult to evaluate. The original version of Von Stroheim's *Greed* can never be reconstructed. Who knows what Eisenstein had in mind when he shot the 100,000 feet of film that later became *Thunder Over Mexico*?²

I saw the *I Am Curious* films in a single sitting in the Sandrews preview room—a room which is one of the locations shown in the film. To reach the preview room I rode in the elevator in which Lena Neyman and Vilgot Sjöman are riding as the film opens. I sat in the preview room for over four hours. At the end of the four hours I was convinced that Sjöman does not go far enough in his claim that the two films are necessary to accomplish his purpose. Sjöman says that the films can be seen separately and that it doesn't matter much which you see first. I think they should be seen together and that *Yellow* should precede *Blue*. Ordinarily I regard the double feature as anathema, but with this film—or these films—it takes on a new meaning. Unfortunately, distributors and exhibitors will make more money showing the films at different times.

Sjöman says that in *I Am Curious (Blue)* he is treating the same subject matter from a different point of view—and he does not specify what point of view he is talking about. The

implied question does not have a simple answer and the answer varies with the level of meaning one is talking about.

In the *Yellow* film much emphasis is placed upon Sjöman's perceptions of social ills. The relations between the characters in the film are developed as an effect of the social forces impinging upon the people.

I Am Curious (Blue) is much more concerned with the relations between people (cause) and the implications of these relations for the social structure of the nation (effect).

Yellow is a man's film—*Blue* is a woman's film. *Yellow* is Sjöman's film. *Blue* is Lena's.

Structurally the films are quite similar. In both Sjöman begins with an exposition of his understanding of Swedish social ills: direct and forceful in *Yellow* and much more subtle in *Blue*. In both films Lena is shown in her involvement with people, in the locale of Stockholm. In both her initial role is that of questioner, gadfly, social dissident. In both she leaves Stockholm and goes out into the country, searching for something. In *Yellow* she is searching for self-control and for a value system. In *Blue* she is again searching for values but also for her mother. Or for a mother-image.

Both films end with her return to the city and with disillusionment.

Yellow is about class structure, nonviolence, and value systems. *Blue* is about religion, the prison system, and sex. Much of the publicity about *Yellow* has described it as a "sex film." For example, the *New York Times* carried a headline—"U.S. Court Clears Swedish Sex Film." (November 27, 1968) But the explicit depiction of the sex act it contains is subservient to the main issues considered in the film. The *Blue* film does not contain nearly as much explicit sexual material but sex and its implications are the major thematic materials of the film.

In *Yellow* Sjöman has indicated in the film about the making of the film that the director and the principal male actor, Börje, are in conflict over the affections of Lena. In *Blue* this conflict runs through the film but Lena has no contact with Börje in the film within the film at all.

Early in *Blue* Sjöman, as the director, briefs Lena on the conflicts that led to the break-up of her fictional parents. As the fictional Lena, she spends much of her time searching for her mother in rural Sweden. Before she leaves on this quest, Sjöman establishes several themes which run through the film.

In the Stockholm sequence she is shown questioning people about religion, prison practices, the role of women, and sexual attitudes. This questioning follows the pattern of *Yellow* in that it is entirely separated from an emotional involvement with the people she is questioning. Up to a certain crucial point it is clear that the people Lena is questioning are real people, playing themselves. They are not actors and they will not be seen again. But in the *Blue* film, after a series of such encounters with ordinary people, selected at random off the streets, we see Lena interviewing a young woman in her usual interviewing style. While the interview is progressing a man walks up and joins the conversation. At this point Lena starts conversing with both of them as though they were people she had known earlier. We hear Lena's voice on the sound track saying, "I should have recognized Bim." When Lena steps out of her character as an interviewer and says, "I should have recognized Bim," is she speaking for herself? Or is she playing a role assigned her by Sjöman? As a matter of fact, the question remains ambiguous throughout the film. Indeed, the "real" characters, and the "fictional" characters gradually merge until by the end of the film they are virtually indistinguishable.

The man who has joined Lena and Bim's conversation is Hans, who is either married to or simply living with Bim on an old boat. Sjöman tells us that Hans has been Lena's chief mentor in the matter of nonviolence. This, of course, is a contradiction of the impression we had earlier in the *Yellow* film of Martin Luther King as Lena's primary influence in these matters. Thus we have another ambiguity.

In a sequence which takes place in a vaguely phallic-looking tower in a Stockholm amusement park we learn that Hans is impotent—or at least that he cannot make it with Lena. First he tells her it is because they are in the

tower and he is afraid of heights. Then they tumble (by hoked-up film magic) to the ground and find he can't make it there either. Hans then tells Lena that he can achieve a climax with Bim. But he says that it is usually after they have had an argument. We only learn what this means when the *Blue* film is nearly over. More of that later.

There is considerable development of the relation between Hans and Lena—with Bim a shadowy figure in the background. One of the things Hans does is to make up little songs for Lena. In one he speaks of the earth as a great pillow on which Lena rests. And he asks whether the pillow is big enough for both beasts and men.

After laying the groundwork in Stockholm for further considerations of the social issues of sex, the status of women, religion, and the prison system, for further development of the conflict between Börje and Sjöman, and for later revelations regarding the complex relations among Bim, Hans, and Lena, Sjöman sends Lena out on her search for her mother.

Lena's search for her mother is another apparent contradiction. In the *Yellow* film she had the following conversation with her father:

Rune: . . . Just like I felt about you when you were little and your mother ran off.

Lena: Oh, that bitch!

Rune: Oh well, she was all right.

Lena: No, she wasn't—showing up after eight years and wanting me back.

Thus, in *Yellow* Lena rejects her mother completely; then in *Blue* she goes searching for her. In *Yellow* Lena tries to sort out her relationships with men—with her father-images. And in *Blue* she adds a search for relationships with women—with mother-images.

When Lena leaves Stockholm she travels north, towards the land of the midnight sun. In *Yellow* when she left the city she dropped her role of interviewer entirely. But in *Blue* she continues it throughout her quest.

The "fictional" Lena is investigating social attitudes as she searches for her mother. The "real" Lena is trying to extricate herself from her affair with Sjöman so that she can devote

herself exclusively to the "real" Börje. In the *Yellow* film "fictional" Lena was furious with Börje because he was dishonest with her about his relations with Marie. In the *Blue* film, "real" Lena is dishonest with Sjöman about wanting to leave him for Börje. By this time Sjöman has done such a convincing job of merging the real and the fictional characters that the audience expects the two roles to be consistent with each other. Ambiguities begin to shift freely from level to level.

Her journey takes Lena north on her bicycle, stopping along the way to camp for the night, then moving on, questioning and questing. She visits the prison at Kumla, talks with the prison doctor, and listens in as the doctor interviews a young prisoner who is about to be paroled. She occasionally hitchhikes, bicycle and all. One of her benefactors gives her a ride and a case of crabs to boot. Sjöman makes it quite clear that she gets the crabs only because her host rubs his hand affectionately over her face. The man's wife is riding in the backseat, so we are convinced nothing else has happened.

From time to time the film crew appears before the camera singing little songs which sum up the social issues Sjöman is dealing with.

Sjöman does not let the beauty of the Swedish countryside escape the eye of his camera. Although he does not make a major point of the scenery, he quite obviously loves the rural values of his country.

At the northern-most point of her pilgrimage Lena goes to a small country-town dance—armed with her tape recorder and her questions. Throughout the film Lena's questions about sex are aimed at pointing up the ideas Sjöman wishes to express about sexual discrimination, the double standard, and sexual responsibility. She asks both men and women what methods of birth control they prefer and who should be responsible for using them. She inquires about attitudes toward premarital sex and about the rights and privileges of men and women. While she is questioning the young people attending the dance about sexual attitudes, we see, intercut with Lena asking questions, a singer, Sonja, who is part of the band.

Sonja is older than Lena and has an air about her of world-weariness and disillusionment.

Sonja and Lena become close friends. It develops that Sonja has a teenage daughter and that she does not seem to be attached to any man. Lena is camping by herself in the northern woods and Sonja comes to visit her from time to time. On one occasion they go swimming together in a rather shallow pond. Lena's entry into the water, an awkward, butt-first leap accompanied by a raucous, joyous screech, is a moment of lusty low comedy.

After the swim they come out of the shallow water covered with mud. Sonja carefully wipes the mud off Lena. They then part, agreeing to meet later that night, together with Sonja's daughter.

While waiting for Sonja and her daughter, Lena witnesses an explicit sexual encounter between two lesbians. Lena isn't quite peeking through a keyhole. As a matter of fact, she is peeking through a window. (Sjöman regards everybody as voyeurs.) We next see Sonja and her daughter searching for Lena in the woods. But Lena has left. She has decided that what was developing between herself and Sonja was not entirely appropriate to her concept of herself as a red-blooded heterosexual.

Lena, having found neither her real mother nor an adequate substitute, returns to Stockholm. For a place to be quiet and lick her wounds and recover from her traumas she moves onto the boat where Bim and Hans are living. Bim is jealous and annoyed, but at the same time understanding and protective toward Lena. Then, suddenly, Lena suffers another vast disillusionment. She finds out what Hans, her tutor in nonviolence, meant when he said he could get sexual satisfaction with Bim after they had had a little fight. For Hans is a sadist. His "little fight" is in reality a brutal beating he must administer to his victim, Bim, before he can become aroused.

Lena's several quests have led her to nothing. She has uncovered many social problems but no solutions. Her search for leadership has revealed human frailty and fallibility in place of strength. And she has found neither a father

nor a mother. The flag of Sweden has proven an empty symbol.

Sjöman ends the film with two sequences. First he replays the scene at the end of the *Yellow* film in which Lena told Börje she had scabies. Only this time she calls it the crabs. (I am trusting that the translator was accurate. I do not understand Swedish.) In the *Yellow* film Sjöman kept interrupting and we never saw the scene played out. In the *Blue* film Börje and Lena have a screaming set-to with Börje blaming Lena and Lena blaming Börje. Börje screams at her, "It's your fault, it's always the woman's fault." And this, of course, is at the heart of one of Sjöman's major concerns—the lack of acceptance of sexual responsibility on the part of the male.

As the film closes, we see bits of the shooting of the sequence regarding the de-crabbing process in the hospital. Then the film crew get into an argument about what they are going to shoot next. They decide to do the scene in which Lena finds her mother. So we see Lena leaving the hospital and finding her mother, walking down the path toward her. They rush into each others' arms.

This utterly fake ending is a little reminiscent of the ending of *The Magician*, in which the magician goes riding off in triumph to perform before the King. That wasn't what the magician wanted, and finding her mother thus is no solution to Lena's problems either.

But Sjöman has made some powerful statements. I am sure his Swedish audience came away from the films considerably shaken in whatever complacency they felt about Swedish institutions. And the films will not leave an American audience feeling comfortable either. Many of our unconscious assumptions will be questioned. As well they might be. As Hans asks in his song to Lena, "Is the great pillow of the earth big enough for both man and beast?" They're the same thing, you know.

—CLYDE B. SMITH (young film critic, age 50)

ISADORA

Director: Karel Reisz. Producers: Robert and Raymond Hakim. Script: Melvyn Bragg and Clive Exton, based on "My Life" by Isadora Duncan and "Isadora Duncan" by Sewell Stokes. Music: Maurice Jarre.

Most film biographies of artists deify and sentimentalize, without presenting anything but the most inoffensive generalities about their subjects. In films like *Moulin Rouge*, *Young Cassidy*, *A Song to Remember*, *Song Without End* (the list gets drearier), the plea is that the artist is ordinary and likeable: his problems are really not that different from yours or mine, they're just worse. *Isadora* doesn't pretend to woo the masses; its central figure is not like us, and we learn a great deal about her which is unpleasant, even sordid, in sharply defined vignettes which challenge us to reckon with some new aspect of her personality. The structure of the film is a pattern of cross-cutting between Isadora in her later life and her memories of the past, told in flashbacks, which gracefully expedite the clumsiness of time we're usually burdened with in film biographies. As she dictates her memoirs, we come to know Isadora in bits and fragments, as we would any new personality entering our lives.

Director Karel Reisz cleverly satirizes the seriousness and pretentious devotion to art of the youthful Isadora, whose antipodal extremes of spirituality and sensuality are as attractive as they are preposterous and comical. In her longing for immortality and immorality, Isadora is the contradiction of flesh and spirit; an iconoclast, yet stubbornly dogmatic about her conception of art. Calmly acknowledging her "destiny," endowed with the vitality, imagination, and spirited determination of youth to disarm and conquer, Isadora, supremely self-confident and self-important, refuses to accept any limitations about herself.

Reisz captures the idealism and innocence of young spiritual devotees, more passionate about art than they are about each other, who glory in the platonic, mystical, asexual aspects of love. The episode with Craig, her first lover, an artist as ethereal and egocentric as Isadora, dramatizes the way in which Isadora utilizes